



## Election 2012: Per-student spending is too high

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The Register recently published a collection of letters from local school board members complaining that “lack of money” kept them from providing our kids with an education [“Schools have great fiscal challenges ahead,” Oct. 21].

Despite the cries of agony by the public school establishment about layoffs and library closings, California per student spending in 2012-13 will be about \$1,800 higher than in the 2002-03 school year, a level of spending that represents only a \$445 decline in constant, inflation-adjusted dollars in 10 years, or 3.9 percent. The simple truth is that the total amount of money we are spending – \$10,634 per student or about \$300,000 per year for a classroom of 30 for nine-month schools – is adequate to pay for world-class schools.

This figure is higher than the numbers commonly reported by the California Department of Education and California’s teacher unions, which usually report “current dollar” spending figures, which do not count interest on school bonds, school construction costs and employee retirement.

It’s like walking onto a new car lot and finding that the salesperson has quoted a price that does not include the engine, tires or steering wheel.

Although multiple reasons exist for many California school districts finding themselves in what they view as dire straits, probably the leading one is that many school boards, often elected with teachers union donations, have long ago “given away the store” to district employees. Just as bloated pensions drove the cities of Stockton and San Bernardino to bankruptcy, so employee salaries and benefits have driven many public school districts toward insolvency.

Spending on our public schools has long correlated poorly with outcomes such as test scores and dropout rates. Recently the per-student spending of the Washington, D.C., public schools was pegged by Andrew Coulson of the Cato Institute, at an astounding \$29,409, a level confirmed by the Washington Post. The district had been able to conceal that spending previously because so much of that money is federal and comes from the District of Columbia. For all that spending, they get a school system so dysfunctional that not a single member of Congress enrolls his or her children in D.C. schools.

What has worked to improve test scores and dropout rates and with less per student spending, are more charter schools and private school voucher programs such as those in Cleveland and Milwaukee, modeled on the highly successful educational voucher programs at the college level such as the G.I. Bill of Rights and Pell Grants.

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